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Idaho gears up to fight tire-puncturing weeds

MERIDIAN, Idaho (AP) — A fast-moving invasive weed that spreads a carpet of thorns on the ground, punctures bicycle tires and bedevils farmers is the target of a full-scale counterattack in Idaho.

Teams of hand-pullers in every county will be organized next spring by weed consultant Roger Batt, who anticipates he'll have no trouble finding volunteers.

"People hate puncture vine," he said. Puncture vine, puncture weed, goat-head — call it what you want, it's making a home for itself in much of Idaho. Bicyclists, farmers and weed specialists report seeing more of it now than ever before, especially in urban areas.

The plant is a foreign invader that probably arrived in a shipment of wool

from the Mediterranean region more than a century ago. It has spread over most of the United States, including all Western states except Alaska.

In its native environment, bugs keep puncture vine in check. But it has no natural enemies in the arid regions of the West — except for the humans who loathe it. There are plenty of them.

"You fix enough flat tires and step on enough of these things in the carpet and pretty soon you develop a deep resentment for this species of plant," said Roak TenEyck, who devotes his life to fighting the weed.

Puncture vine observers agree that the plant is spreading in Idaho.

David Peckham, a carpenter, said he

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WEED consultant Roger Batt holds up an invasive weed, called puncture vine, Tuesday in Meridian, Idaho. **MATT CILLEY/AP Photo**

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saw puncture vine in Moscow for the first time this year. Peckham, who has lived in his northern Idaho town since 1977, blames global warming.

"Moscow is warmer and drier than it was 20 years ago, and I've never seen this stuff before," he said.

Puncture vine is one of 36 plants classified as noxious by the state of Idaho.

Noxious weeds — which include purple loosestrife and Eurasian watermilfoil — are invaders from another region that have taken an unusually strong hold on their area, crowding out native species. Puncture vine's seeds are able to travel, sticking to truck tires, clothes, or animal fur. They can live for as long as 75 years in the ground, waiting for the right conditions to germinate.

The ground the right conditions last spring, said Wayne

Hoffman, a spokesman for the Idaho Department of Agriculture.

"Because of the wet spring and early summer, many noxious weeds are worse now than they were last year," he said.

The harmfulness of those weeds isn't always apparent to the untrained observer. The delicate purple blossoms of loosestrife add beauty to many roadsides, and until recently it was a popular addition to home gardens.

But nobody feels that way about the vine, which grabs attention with its round head studded with spikes.

"I would say puncture vine is one of the most well-recognized weeds in the state of Idaho because it's painful when you step on it, and people notice when they ride their bike through it," said Batt, who works for the Idaho Weed Awareness Campaign, a collaboration of state and federal agencies, universities, conservation groups, private businesses and landowners.